

Strengthening of the Cotton Dominance Policy in the Agriculture of the Uzbekistan SSR and its Consequences

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the fact that the Uzbek SSR devoted a large part of its natural resources and human capital to cotton cultivation, while other sectors of agriculture and industry remained underdeveloped. It highlights the fact that extensive irrigation systems were built to increase cotton yields, which ultimately led to the drying up of the Aral Sea - a global ecological disaster. It also highlights and analyzes the strengthening of the cotton monopoly policy in the agriculture of the Uzbek SSR and its consequences from a historical perspective.

Keywords: Main Cotton Base; Restoration of Cotton Cultivation; National Economy; Light and Food Industry; Cotton Cultivation; Cotton Fiber; Textile Enterprises; Cotton Work.

1. Introduction

During the Soviet era, the Uzbek SSR developed rapidly under a policy of monoculture cotton production. Cotton, often referred to as “white gold”, became the cornerstone of the republic's economic strategy. The primary goal was to produce and export large quantities of cotton for the Soviet Union. However, this approach had significant social, economic, and environmental consequences. The republic devoted a large portion of its natural resources and human capital to cotton production, while other sectors of agriculture and industry remained underdeveloped. Extensive irrigation systems were built to increase cotton yields, which ultimately led to the drying up of the Aral Sea a global ecological disaster.

1.1. Study Objective

The following are the objectives of this study: 1) to Analyze the Historical Strengthening of Cotton Monoculture Policy, 2) to Assess the Economic Impact of Cotton Dominance, 3) to Evaluate the Social Consequences of Cotton Policy, 4) to Examine the Environmental Consequences of Cotton Expansion, 5) to Explore the Role of Cotton in Soviet and Socialist Bloc Industries, and 6) to Investigate the Political and Institutional Outcomes.

2. Material and Methods

In the historical analysis of the strengthening of the cotton monopoly policy in the agriculture of the Uzbek SSR and its consequences, the following methods of scientific knowledge were used: analysis and synthesis, retrospective analysis, comparative analysis, generalization, dialectical method, and synergetic.

3. Results and Discussion

The cotton industry relied heavily on labor, often involving the rural population in forced labor. Economically, Uzbekistan became a cotton “plantation” of the Soviet Union, losing economic independence and diversification. “Uzbekistan, having become the main cotton base of the Union, took a leading position among the allied republics

in this regard. The republic ranked third in terms of gross cotton output after the United States and China. Uzbekistan accounted for 80% of cotton exported from the USSR to foreign countries” [1]. During the Soviet era, Uzbekistan became the main cotton-growing republic within the USSR. Soviet agricultural policy, which intensified from the 1920s until the mid-20th century, paid great attention to expanding cotton cultivation in Central Asia, and in particular in Uzbekistan, due to its favorable climate and geography. By the 1950s-1980s, Uzbekistan had established itself as the leading supplier of cotton to the Soviet Union. Cotton was called “white gold”, and the entire agricultural infrastructure - large irrigation canals, collective farms and state farms - was concentrated around its mass production. The expansion of cotton cultivation led to serious environmental degradation, in particular the destruction of the Aral Sea, and caused long-term social and labor problems, including forced labor during the harvest season.

The period after World War II was a period of reconstruction for the Soviet Union. On February 5, 1946, the USSR government adopted a resolution “On the Plan and Measures for the Restoration and Further Development of Cotton Growing in Uzbekistan in 1946-1953” [2]. The post-World War II period was a period of extensive reconstruction for the Soviet Union. The war destroyed a large part of the USSR's economy, infrastructure, and agriculture. In this context, the reconstruction of key sectors became a priority task for the central government. Uzbekistan, as a major cotton-growing republic, played a strategic role in this reconstruction. The following were adopted in a resolution of the Soviet government on February 5, 1946:

First, to expand cotton-sown areas;

Second, to restore and build irrigation systems;

Third, to increase agricultural machinery and technical support;

Fourth, to strengthen agrotechnical research and seed selection programs;

Fifth, to mobilize labor resources for intensive cotton cultivation.

These measures were crucial in transforming Uzbekistan into the primary cotton base of the USSR in the post-war decades. They also laid the foundation for the large-scale cotton policy that dominated the republic's economy for decades to come.

“Every year, the union budget received 5 billion soums from the sale of cotton products” [3]. During the Soviet Union, cotton was not just an agricultural commodity; it was a strategic economic asset. As Uzbekistan was the main cotton-growing republic, it played a crucial role in generating revenue for the Soviet central government. This made cotton one of the main sources of income for the Soviet economy, supporting industrial development, defense spending, and international trade. However, while most of this profit went to the central budget in Moscow, Uzbekistan retained a small portion of the revenue. The imbalance reflected the Soviet economy's centralized resource extraction model, in which peripheral republics like Uzbekistan served primarily as suppliers of raw materials. As a result, Uzbekistan's economy became heavily dependent on a single sector—cotton farming—leading to long-term economic monoculture and limited diversification.

“The development of the cotton growing complex was also of great importance for the national economy of the republic, contributing to the emergence and development of the light and food industries. These industries employed 41 percent of the republic's industrial workers” [4]. Cotton was not only the main export commodity, but also the main factor in the formation and development of the light and food industries. Cotton fiber served as an important raw material for the textile industry, while cottonseed oil was of great importance for the food industry. This synergy led to the emergence and expansion of new industries within the republic.

“In order to meet the need for cotton products, the Union directive bodies adopted a special resolution in February 1946. It strictly demanded an increase in cotton production in Uzbekistan by 2.5 times over five years” [5]. This directive was based on the economic and strategic interests of the USSR. During the post-war reconstruction period, domestic and international demand for cotton products increased. Therefore, expanding cotton cultivation became a priority, which prompted large-scale investments in agricultural infrastructure, irrigation systems, mechanization, and labor mobilization. This policy played a decisive role in turning Uzbekistan into the main cotton-growing republic of the Soviet Union.

“In 1976, cotton fiber exports accounted for 94.6% of exports that year” [6]. This indicator clearly shows the republic's heavy economic dependence on cotton production and processing. Cotton fiber was not only the main source of income, but also had strategic importance in the industrial and export policy of the Soviet Union. The bulk of the cotton fiber produced in Uzbekistan was directed to Soviet industrial centers and foreign markets. This dependence limited the growth of other industries within the republic and led to a highly monocultural economy.

“In the 70s and 80s, 80% of textile enterprises in Bulgaria and Hungary, 70% of textile enterprises in Poland, and the vast majority of other “socialist countries” worked on Uzbek cotton” [7]. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Soviet Union and its allies formed an organization known as the “socialist economic bloc”, characterized by strict central planning and economic interdependence. Within this system, the distribution of raw materials and finished products was tightly controlled by central authorities. Uzbek cotton fiber played a crucial role not only in the domestic economy of the USSR, but also as the main raw material for the textile industries of the allied socialist countries. About 80% of textile factories in Bulgaria and Hungary depended on Uzbek cotton fiber, which indicates the widespread use and high quality of Uzbek cotton. About 70% of textile factories in Poland operated on Uzbek cotton. Poland had a highly developed textile sector that relied on a consistent supply of cotton for efficient production. Countries such as Czechoslovakia, East Germany (GDR), and Romania also had many textile enterprises that relied heavily on Uzbek cotton. The economic consequences of this structure were significant. The Uzbek economy became almost entirely dependent on cotton production, which reduced the diversification of the economy and increased vulnerability. This system exemplifies the centralized and planned nature of the Soviet economy and the economic division of labor in the socialist bloc. Uzbek cotton served not only as a national asset, but also as a vital raw material base for the entire socialist economic system.

“In 1980, the cotton harvest in Uzbekistan amounted to 6 million 237 thousand tons” [8]. This indicator reflects the leading position of the republic in cotton cultivation and its important role as a major supplier of raw materials in the Soviet economy. Such a large volume of cotton cultivation was achieved by expanding cultivation systems,

improving irrigation infrastructure, and increasing mechanization in agriculture. However, such growth increased Uzbekistan's economic dependence on cotton monoculture, reduced economic diversification, and created environmental problems. At the same time, cotton exports brought significant income to the republic's budget, provided the necessary resources for other Soviet industrial sectors and state needs.

In the fall of 1983, when Usmonkhodjaev tried to explain to M. S. Gorbachev by phone that the increased cotton production plan could not be implemented in practice and that the harvest in the fields had run out, Gorbachev angrily asked: “What is the population of Uzbekistan?” — “17 million.” — “If it is necessary to implement the plan, then the entire 17 million population should be brought out to harvest cotton” [9]. This response reveals the regime’s willingness to ignore human factors and natural limitations to achieve its intended goals, and emphasizes the mobilization of labor at all costs. This incident is emblematic of the extreme pressures exerted on the population of Uzbekistan under the cotton monoculture policy. The state’s demand to increase cotton production often translated into widespread forced labor, with rural residents, including women and children, forced to participate in the laborious and time-consuming cotton harvest. The expansion of cotton production and irrigation had severe environmental consequences, particularly the shrinking of the Aral Sea, which led to ecological destruction and serious health problems for the local population. The forced mobilization of labor and the disregard for social welfare reflected the Soviet system’s prioritization of economic quotas over human rights and environmental sustainability. Ultimately, this episode reveals the fundamental contradictions of the Soviet planned economy, which, while aiming to increase production and fulfill state plans, often came at great social and environmental costs. Uzbekistan’s experience with cotton monoculture highlights the dangers of such a rigid economic model that sacrificed long-term sustainability for short-term goals.

The 16th Plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan, held on June 23, 1984, marked the beginning of an important and controversial period in the history of Uzbekistan, known as the “cotton affair” or “cotton conflict.” The plenum discussed in detail the serious issues of cotton production failures, unfulfilled quotas, and systemic problems in cotton farming. The plenum sharply criticized the state of cotton farming, labor discipline, production efficiency, and the elimination of shortcomings in personnel management. This meeting led to increased control over agricultural sectors throughout Uzbekistan, and measures were taken to combat underperformance in the implementation of production plans. The “Cotton Affair” exposed widespread social discontent and pressure among the population. The Soviet authorities used coercive methods to increase cotton yields, which caused strong protests and crises in the communities. This event was an important turning point in the economic and political life of Uzbekistan, prompting a revision of cotton cultivation policy and paving the way for new economic approaches in the following years.

4. Conclusion and Recommendation

4.1. Conclusion

In short, while the Soviet-era cotton monoculture policy contributed significantly to the economic development of the Uzbek SSR, its long-term consequences created serious problems. The economy's dependence on a single crop,

environmental degradation, and social pressures became major challenges for the republic. This historical experience has shown the importance of economic diversification and sustainable development for Uzbekistan's future.

4.2. Future Recommendations

Further issues, which may be considered in the future study, are the following:

- 1) Encourage the cultivation of alternative crops such as wheat, fruits, and vegetables to reduce dependence on cotton monoculture and ensure food security for the population.
- 2) Develop water-efficient technologies (drip irrigation, laser land leveling) and restore damaged irrigation systems to conserve water resources and prevent ecological disasters like the Aral Sea crisis from recurring.
- 3) Implement strict ecological monitoring, soil restoration programs, and afforestation initiatives to rehabilitate degraded land and address long-term environmental damage caused by excessive cotton expansion.
- 4) Ensure fair wages, eliminate forced labor practices, and provide rural workers with training, social benefits, and alternative employment opportunities beyond cotton farming.
- 5) Develop light industry, food processing, and modern manufacturing sectors to reduce overdependence on cotton fiber exports and to create added value within the national economy.
- 6) Support agricultural research centers and universities to develop improved crop varieties, promote climate-resilient farming methods, and integrate advanced technologies into farming practices.
- 7) Collaborate with neighboring countries and global organizations on water management, trade diversification, and environmental restoration projects to address transboundary challenges and enhance sustainable development.

Declarations

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Consent for publication

The author declares that he/she consented to the publication of this study.

Authors' contributions

Author's independent contribution.

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